

1 NEWS AS COMMUNICATION

But she only loves him because he's got a Cortina

The Lambrettas

In the beginning

When we learn to speak, we learn much more than words. From the very beginning we use language not just to name things, but, more importantly, to work out how to behave towards other people and the world 'out there'. For instance, together with the words 'biscuit' and 'dog' we may learn approval; similarly, together with the words 'hot' and 'dirty' we may learn not to touch the gas stove or that otherwise quite tempting object left behind by the cat. Even at this stage, we don't only rely on our own sensations but also on what we've learnt in language as the way of organizing the world around us into some semblance of order. So when a close and trusted grown-up says 'ah-hah, that's hot', we may well take our enquiring finger away from the teapot without actually feeling the heat. Likewise, we may not even notice many of the innumerable sensations that present themselves to our senses — preferring to concentrate on those we've learnt, or have been encouraged, to speak about.

Speech, then, is the means by which we select and organize our experiences, and it is the medium through which we learn how to behave, how to react, what to believe. Furthermore, speech isn't something over which we have individual control — it is supplied to us as a ready made tool by other people. We learn to find, explore and understand our own individuality within its terms. If you like, at the very moment when we begin to use language we enter the wider world of social relations — but at that same moment we have our first encounter with a form of social control. We learn to be

what we are through a language-system whose rules and conventions we can neither alter nor ignore.

However, most of us are able and happy to take this impersonal and unavoidable social force of speech as we find it. It seems quite natural, and it is very much in our own interests to go along with the rules and constraints for the sake of the benefits we gain from successful communication. If, as often happens, we can't express our thoughts, feelings or desires adequately with the linguistic resources at our command, we generally blame ourselves and seek to find a way to improve our performance. It doesn't occur to us to say that because language has failed us this time it is no good and we'll henceforth either abandon it or make up a new one. Should we be tempted to take such measures, there are plenty of people around us who will do their best to 'cure' us and bring us back into the speech community. Hence our submission to the social control of the language-system is usually both voluntary and taken for granted. Having submitted to the range of possibilities offered by language (including, remember, both values and a structuring system by which we order the perceptions of the world and our own inner sensations), we are free to go on to make sense of our selves and our lives, and to act creatively in society. But even as we speak, language speaks us.

As time goes on, our command of language increases. But it doesn't just grow like a shopping list with the simple addition of more and more items. Instead, we learn whole new sub-languages, as it were, which we encounter as our experience and circumstances develop. In other words, whenever we enter a new field of experience, we find our way by a process which resembles not simply learning, but rather the first experience of learning language. We're immersed in a whole set of new terms, rules or codes, and the conventions which govern how this particular sub-set of language operates. As with all speech, these terms, codes and conventions are the bearers of a structure of meanings and values, which we construct out of the linguistic raw materials as we use them in context. Often we put a good deal of effort into getting it right and take a good deal of pleasure in 'playing' (often, as with puns, banter and verbal games, well beyond the bounds of rational 'sense') with the language sub-set associated with a field of activity that we value. We identify strongly with certain language-systems, and seek to present ourselves in their terms. And often we can communicate

quite successfully within an area of language without necessarily having direct experience of its associated activities.

For instance, most people as they grow up are encouraged to get involved in activities which are somehow seen as appropriate to their gender. This process starts very early, with the differences between the kinds of toys seen as 'right' for boys and girls respectively; with the kinds of books, tastes and interests they are encouraged towards; and with the sorts of values and identifications they are expected to fulfil in themselves. By the time people reach their teens, this process has usually gone a long way, so there are quite specialized areas which separate still further the supposed distinctions between the sexes. Hence whilst it is apparently 'right' for boys to spend a lot of time learning about – and learning to *talk* about – cars, sport and the like, it is equally deemed 'right' for girls to learn the language of make-up, fashion, etc.

On the surface there's not much in common between cars and make-up. Indeed, the differences are often what is most valued by those who, respectively, enter 'cosmetics culture' and 'Cortina culture'. But the process by which these differences are achieved is much the same. Take the example of make-up. The skill required to choose, apply and combine the various types of skin care products and make-up is neither the first nor the most important thing to be learnt. There is a whole language or culture of cosmetics within which each person must find her own way of expressing her identity – as well as relating to others involved in the same culture. The language of cosmetics is learnt through the media of women's and girls' magazines, advertisements, the advice of parents or other older acquaintances, and by constant 'girl-talk' with school- or work-mates and friends. Along with ideas about colours, new products, and the relative merits of different lotions, there is an ordered world of meanings and values to which these practical activities give material expression. The 'symbolic order' offers an imaginative space for us to identify with – if we seem to fit that space, we'll take an interest in the products. More important, we'll be able to see and present our 'selves' with confidence in the recognized and accepted idiom of this linguistic system.

But while we are learning the specialized language-system of cosmetics culture (or Cortina culture), we are learning a lot more besides. For instance, it is obvious that much of this culture is promoted and directed by business and commercial interests – it is an

industry. At the very moment we seek to express our real and innermost essence as individuals through the medium of make-up and its associated values and range of meanings, we are simultaneously entering into bargains with impersonal social institutions like cosmetics firms, magazine publishers and high street retailers. We learn how to live within the frameworks given by these institutions. Without losing our fascination for the products and for the culture by which both they and part of our own 'sense of self' is defined, we learn to accept as natural the existence and personal relevance of the industrial framework.

And so the effect, or function, of our individual involvement with cosmetics is two-fold. We unwittingly reproduce social structures and relationships and our identity is produced *by ourselves* to fit in with these structures and relations. It follows that we put a lot of personal effort into subjecting ourselves to subordinate, dependent positions in society.

The way in which we learn to accept the social forces and institutions around us as natural is primarily through the medium of language-systems like the one associated with cosmetics which I've just outlined. There is a two-way process involved with all of these cultural sub-systems. We literally create or produce our own individual identity by means of the various overlapping systems we learn to speak; and conversely the social forces and institutions are themselves maintained and transmitted over time by means of the active reproduction of their meanings, values and routines in the speech and habits of us, their bearers or carriers.

In a society as complex and industrialized as that of the West, there are innumerable specialized meaning-systems or 'discourses' that can be identified. Everyone's identity can be seen partly as a result of the selection and involvement to which s/he has been exposed or has chosen. However, not all of these discourses are esteemed as equally important. For instance, the world of public affairs, politics and current events seems to enjoy a higher prestige than the more private world of domestic life, personal relationships, sexuality and emotions. There seems to be a social process at work in which certain facets of our overall culture 'count' more than others.

News-discourse

And so we come to the news. It is a social and cultural institution

among many others, and it shares their characteristics in important ways. It is, literally, made of words and pictures, so comprising a specially differentiated sub-system within language. Although many people don't take a detailed interest in it, especially until after they leave school, it nevertheless enjoys a privileged and prestigious position in our culture's hierarchy of values. And of course, the way we relate to it as individuals is actively to learn its particular language-system. We do this without needing to make any more or less of a deliberate effort than we expend on learning to speak for the first time. Just as learning ordinary language entails learning values and a range of selected and structured responses to what we see around us, so it is with news. News comes to us as the pre-existing discourse of an impersonal social institution which is also an industry. As we get used to its codes and conventions we will become 'news-literate' — not only able to follow the news and recognize its familiar cast of characters and events, but also spontaneously able to interpret the world at large in terms of the codes we have learnt from the news. Individually, we perceive and interpret the world in terms partly derived from classifications made familiar in the news; collectively, we make up 'reality' as we go along, perceiving it as meaningful to the extent that it can be made to resemble the expectations we bring to it from the ordered language-system of the news.

However, it must be said at once that the news, whether heard on radio, read in newspapers or seen on television, gains much of its 'shape' from the characteristics of the medium in which it appears. We shall explore later on in this book the extent to which TV news in particular promotes a similar view of the world as TV fiction, from soap opera to adventure series. In other words, the question arises as to how far news comprises an autonomous sub-system of language by itself, and how far it is merely one of the variations in a larger system.

In order to answer that question, we need to make a distinction between two of the terms I've been using almost interchangeably up till now. We must distinguish between a *language-system* and a *discourse*. A system is a structure of *elements* in a rule-governed set of *relations*. To understand it you have to be able to *identify* the different elements from each other, and show how they are selected and combined according to the rules or conventions appropriate to that system. In the case of language, for example, the system is the

generative structure which enables us to produce actual speech in conditions of 'rule-governed creativity'. In other words, the system doesn't dictate *what* we say, it determines the *way* we can produce language that is understood as meaningful by ourselves and others.

Take, for example, Bernard Shaw's famous proposal for a spelling of the word *fish*, which he maintained could be justified by other examples of English spelling. His version is GHOTI. He arrived at this wonderful spelling by taking the pronunciation of three words, and using their established spelling to make up his fish. The three words are: enough (f); women (i); and nation (sh). But of course pronunciation is one thing, and spelling another. We know there is something fishy about ghoti because the elements *gh*, *o* and *ti* can only be used as *f*, *i* and *sh* in particular positions within words. The rules of combination dictate that if we want to ask for something to go with the chips we do as the language-system tells us: we have to use the conventional rules for combining the recognized elements.

Discourses, on the other hand, are perhaps best understood as the different kinds of *use* to which language is put. Hence in order to understand a discourse we need to look more closely at the social, political and historical conditions of its production and consumption, because these 'determinants' will shape what it says, the way it develops, the status it enjoys, the people who use it, the uses to which it is put and so on.

In discourses, language-systems and social conditions meet. Each individual person will have at her or his command a number of different discourses appropriate to various social relations and activities. Some discourses are more formal than others – for instance the discourse of the court of law is more formal than the discourse of the family. But the less formal (less consciously formal, at any rate) discourse of the family still has its particular forms, uses and effects. Certain terms become 'loaded' with significance, as for instance the whole galaxy of terms surrounding the concept of 'home', in which notions of housework, cleanliness, comfort, privacy, and so on come to *mean* the values associated with care, motherhood, refuge, etc. We come to live out our family roles through the discourse and its associated values.

Whether we then identify with the 'discourse of domesticity', and put our carpet-slipped feet up within it, or whether we resist it, preferring perhaps the discourse of the carpet-bagger, the city and

the night, is another matter. What we cannot do is avoid it. Our everyday interactions are structured by our social/economic/political relations; these relations are experienced through various discourses, and discourses are structured by the generative system of language. Hence in order to live in the everyday situations that feel so natural, so familiar, we must make sense of them through the meanings which discourses have established as the taken-for-granted routine of 'reality'.

Returning to the question of whether or not TV news is an autonomous 'language' or whether it is merely a variant of a larger system, we can now answer more precisely. News is a discourse which is structured by the larger discourses of television. These larger discourses themselves are dependent upon the overall language-system for their elements (signs) and their rules and conventions (codes). News is a very specific example of 'language-in-use', of socially structured meaning. This is one of the reasons for studying it, of course. For language is a very big subject, and understanding its systematic nature does not always lead to an equal understanding of the uses to which it is put socially; the 'politics' of language. Studying a specific discourse, on the other hand, gives us accessible material which cannot be divorced from its social function.

However, once we have understood that news is a discourse generated by a general sign-system in relation to a social structure, we can move on to see that the particular way in which news discourse has developed and is used, is to some extent autonomous. That is to say, news develops in an active and even creative way – it doesn't simply 'reflect' its linguistic, social or historical determinants, it works on them. It transforms its raw materials into a recognizable product, which we accept as familiar.

Talking and writing about the news

One piece of evidence which suggests that the news is indeed an independent or autonomous discourse is the amount of attention and analysis it receives – the extent to which people talk about it. At the level of journalism itself, there is a wide range of journals, TV and radio programmes whose purpose is to comment on and interpret the news. News occupies a significant place in the informal talk of workplace, pub and street. And at the level of formal learning, there is a productive industry of articles, books and courses

all seeking to understand what news is and how it can be related to other forces at work in society.

It is interesting to note that there is a specific and discernible pattern to the kinds of things which are regarded as important by those who talk and write about the news. In other words, as soon as we enter 'news culture' we're confronted by certain issues. High on the league-table of priorities is the question of impartiality — is the news biased towards one political position or not? Is the news more sympathetic to bosses than to trade unionists? Is the news sexist, racist and insensitive to the rights of minorities? Is the news a propaganda mouthpiece for mindless nationalism? In short, does the news report events which are meaningful in themselves, or does it 'translate' them, as it were, into its own meaning-system and scale of values? And if it does, then which social and political groups or forces benefit most from this translation of events into meanings?

Clearly a large proportion of the talk about the news will centre on its political role, since one of its prime purposes is to report on the world of politics and the economy. In addition, many researchers have followed the actual process of news-gathering and news-production, to see what influence the industrial and social organization of the news institutions has on the content of the output. Other researchers have concentrated on the social function of the news — why does a society like ours need it and invest such a large amount of money and prestige in it? What is the use of the news?

A different approach to these kinds of question is offered by historical research. Clearly the way news is produced, what it concentrates on, how its stories are put together and who takes an interest in it, all depend to some extent on the habits and conventions — not to mention technology — which were developed in a previous historical period. Although each new generation is free to break fresh ground and make the news fit its own needs, it has to start from what is already there. This applies to the inherited habits of thought, traditional styles of expression, well-established values, priorities, allegiances and subject areas as much as it does to the more tangible inheritance of machinery, offices and practical skills. In other words, the language of news culture is grounded in a historical process which makes certain choices easy, others much more difficult, as we shall see.

Similarly, the news is a social institution and a cultural discourse

which exists and has meaning only in relation to other institutions and discourses operating at the same time. It cannot be understood in isolation from them, and the people involved in making the news have to fit their activities into a complex social network. Many of these other institutions are pursuing aims which are different and often hostile to those of the news-producers. The State, the law, their competitors, their audiences, and (not least) the people on whose activities they report all constrain the choices open to journalists and broadcasters.

Even so, there is a widespread unease about the 'press barons' and television's social and political power — sometimes wielded for the 'public good', sometimes irresponsibly. The corporations and capitalists who own the means of news production can mount campaigns, of exposure and investigation, or of war-mongering and witch-hunts, which help to alter the political or social direction of a country. Clearly such power leads to a dangerous imbalance between those who control that power and the rest of us. The news is, inevitably, largely what they say it is. Hence much of the critical attention given to news organizations concentrates on watching the watchdog. Otherwise we would have no independent confirmation that what sounds so credible and natural in the news is actually right.

The purpose of this kind of critical attention is clear. Once you've exposed a problem in the way news is collected, put together, distributed, read or used, the next step is to put it right. It is at this point, of course, that your contribution to news-discourse collides with all its other elements. 'Putting things right' then becomes a process of negotiation, hard work, and struggle against opposing ways of seeing. Most of us have neither the time, nor the accredited social status, to engage in such struggles, or even to win access to the necessary positions of credibility and influence.

Thus, despite its value (to which we shall be indebted in this book), this kind of critical attention is limited in practice to relatively few people inside or near news organizations, or in academic, political and certain commercial contexts. For most people, then, there's little hope of changing things in news culture. But things can be changed.

If we can find out how the news works, what interests it serves, and analyse its meanings, we can use that understanding every time we see or read the news: our critical understanding of news-discourse and of the world constructed within it can change even if the news doesn't. As Umberto Eco has put it:

In political activity it is not indispensable to change a given message: it would be enough (or perhaps better) to change the attitude of the audience, so as to induce a different decoding of the message – or in order to isolate the intentions of the transmitter and thus to criticise them. (1980, pp. 148–9)

This critical activity is something we can all perform. We need to know what role the news plays in the process I described earlier, whereby each individual puts so much work into learning social discourses which function to subject him or her to subordinate status. Armed with a little knowledge and a lot of suspicion, we can 'negotiate' with the apparently unarguable meanings of news-discourse on slightly more equal terms. This book is intended to provide some of the 'little knowledge' – the ensuing critical activity is up to you. But if you attempt it, you will be engaging in a crucial task for a society where news, among many other discourses, plays a part in determining how we see the world, how we act in it, and how we behave to other people. And you'll be engaged in a social as well as a personal activity: the struggle to demystify social meanings as part of the effort towards more equal relations between people.